

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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THE RURAL CHURCH IN IOWA

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There can be no doubt within this state of the value attached to everything rural. Iowa interest in rural life is all pervading. Agriculture furnishes the pattern of our daily living. Agriculture is our primary commercial activity. Farmers as a class are our largest purchasers and consumers as well as our most important productive group. The place that we have won in the esteem of the peoples of the earth rests upon our agricultural achievements. Here in Iowa more than two hundred thousand families are building their hopes and their homes in the midst of country life situations and country life activities. Nearly all our other families, some four hundred thirty thousand, are more or less directly dependent upon Iowa's agriculture. Our state possesses to an unparalleled extent the basic natural resources upon which a rural life of wealth and culture and comfort might be built.

The last thirty years have witnessed changes of tremendous import in the rural life within our state. Farming has become a scientific process. It has been commercialized and rendered dependent upon world wide economic forces. With better communications and advancing standards of education and of farm life generally there has come a consequent demand for better service and neighborhoods have given place to larger but less intimate communities. The population of our state, formerly augmented annually by home-seeking newcomers has become practically stationary. Farm organizations have been developed which now render a carefully planned service to every segment of our open country population.

The rural church has changed too. In open country, in villages and in towns, noteworthy developments have been made. Improvement in methods, in educational plans and materials, in programs and organization, is very evident. However, it must be said that the characteristic rural church, in town, in village and in open country has not made comparable adjustments, has, in fact, resisted change to such an extent that many rural churches are largely ineffective and that two out of three of Iowa's open country families are without vital church connections.

Notwithstanding all this, the rural church in Iowa has been and is yet profoundly significant. No other institution can take its place. The simple truth of the matter is that nearly all our greater benefits have been rooted in and nurtured by the church. If, with a disastrous power, one could wipe out from the record of the last thirty years of our rural life those institutions, characters and movements built out of or supported by the struggles and generousities of the church, our present age would be impoverished indeed. How much that is genuinely worthwhile would have to be given up! What bleak vacancies and gaps it would make in our lives! The very hearthstones around which our children play are founded upon the inspirations and aspirations born of this Christian fellowship. The hopes with which we gild the dawning of the better days that are to come--the days

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of the more abundant life--are made of the very substance of our religion. Every instrument we use in our struggle toward the realization of these hopes, every aid to noble thinking and to better living, is forged in the white heat of Christian idealism. The record stands.

MUST REACH RURAL PEOPLE

Recent studies in Iowa confirm the feeling, frequently expressed by responsible rural church leaders, that only a minority of our open country population is ministered to by the church of today. In a township in a southern county it was found that 25.4% answered 'yes' to the question: 'Do you attend church?' In a north central township, thought to be above average, 31% of the families were reported to be definitely connected with the church of their choice. In this same township thirty years previously a parallel study had shown 73% to be similarly connected. I am not interested in the pathology of the situation as such but if we are to think about 'The Rural Church in Iowa' we need to face the uncovered facts.

That church--rural or urban--which does not reach the people is doomed to failure. Rural churches have been all too complacent in the matter of a large proportion of the population outside the attentive concern of any church. The conspicuous failure of the rural church is just here. Economic pressure and social trends alike tend to center the religious ministry in villages and towns. We have not yet widely adopted any practice which succeeds in bringing the population of the center and of the contiguous unchurched open country into a unified program of religious work. In these days of modern communication facilities and of the larger community area it should be possible to definitely relate every family in Iowa to the church of its choice. The folks who care about the Iowa that is to be must not dare to rest until the present situation is corrected. Three matters in connection with this question of enabling the rural churches to reach the people of Iowa must be noted:

First: It is necessary if we are to secure a proper cooperation of groups and a satisfactory interrelation of the interests involved, to study the religious situation of a whole social area. The approach must include a comprehensive understanding of the needs of the trade community or, perhaps more frequently in Iowa, of the county. The circumstances prevailing must be brought out in plain view. Quite probably a religious census will be needed to determine local facts.

Second: If those not now under pastoral supervision are to be included within the ministry of our churches, some means of knowing the definite parochial responsibility of the individual churches must be worked out. A religious census will definitely determine the local church preference of each person within the area involved. It is then a matter of the individual church to so intensify its ministry that every soul expressing a preference for that particular church is reached. Today we know of no situation in which this is impossible.

Third: The heart of the whole problem must be laid bare. Iowa churches have failed to reach the rural people because of apathy. We have let them drift because we did not care enough to do the thing that had to be done to reach them. We must change our attitude. We need to walk yet more closely with our loving Saviour and learn of Him to minister to, to include and to love--'even the least of these, my brethren.' Just that--no program of efficiency, no scheme, no drive, no ambitious plan--just a return to the way of the loving heart. For Christianity is just that--the Way of the Loving Heart.'

A SPIRITUAL AGENCY

I would plead that the Rural Church be recognized as a distinctly spiritual agency. The world is full of splendid organizations with all sorts of noble purposes. Many of these organizations, to a humanity conscious of its increasing needs, are valuable beyond any possible estimate. I plead for the Church, separated, set apart from any of these, unequivocally occupying its proper sphere as a definitely spiritual agency. The New Testament teaches that the Church is 'The Body of Christ.' It is the organ of His Will to accomplish His loving purpose in His needy world. In the light of the New Testament the Church exists to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom, to lead men and women to a loyal personal fellowship with each other and with Jesus Christ, their personal Saviour, accepting for themselves and for society the full consequences of this fellowship.

We have permitted grievous misconceptions of the Church to go unchallenged in the thinking of our generation. Statements are freely made that belittle its position and steal away the foundations of its prestige and value. Then we wonder why men think of the Church as a spent force, why they say it is now insignificant in influence or that now it is of no social worth or weight. We wonder why they are indifferent to its claims. We have let men teach that religion is purely a private affair--a matter between a man and his Maker. A man may become a Christian and may then decide to join a church or he may decide to remain aloof. All of this is so different from the New Testament picture! There Christianity is manifestly a public affair. There are no 'aloof' Christians. A man becomes a follower that he may bear witness to the Gospel. The New Testament has no picture of a satisfactory Christian life in solitude. We need today the inspiration and the help to be won by standing with the other members in the fellowship of the Church--and we need the experience of trying, in the spirit of Christ, to inspire and help them. The Church is a center of inspiration, a wellspring of resourcefulness, from which men go forth to all of life's responsibilities with a new spirit of altruism.

Are we today disappointed with 'The Rural Church in Iowa?' Is it measuring up to New Testament standards? Or is it accomplishing less than we dared hope--less than Christ would have? It is quite fitting that we remind ourselves that the fulfillment of a spiritual mission, the performance of a spiritual task, waits upon spiritual power. And spiritual power is not of ourselves. It is of God. And all of the power of the Eternal Christ is yet available. Give Him a Church that will put away sham and pretense, a Church that will sincerely seek to walk in simple fellowship with men and with God, a Church God-surrendered, sacrificial; and His own words will hurry to fulfillment: 'And greater things than these shall ye do.'

RURAL CHURCH FOLK

We have been thinking about the rural church and we have almost forgotten that there are folk connected with it--rural folk--who are just like you and me--just as strong and just as weak, just as busy and just as sociable, just as intelligent and just as suspicious, just as courageous and just as vacillating, just as progressive and just as backward, just as sincere and just as superficial, just as loyal and just as thoughtless, just as loving and just as unapproachable--in short, just a cross section of the humanity to which you and I belong. And it is this humanity which is so loved by our Heavenly Father. It is for this humanity that all church activities are intended. Let us never lose sight of the fact that the rural Church is centered in our Lord Jesus Christ and exists as an expression of His Spirit--it is His Fellowship freely proffered to humanity--to every soul

everywhere. What may the rural Church try to do? Anything that He would wish done. When may the rural Church cease working at its task? When our Lord Jesus Christ would stop. What groups in a community should the Church oppose? Any opposed to Him and to His program. Who may the rural Church neglect? Any one outside His concern and care.

With these suggestions before us let us look at particular situations. There is an Iowa rural neighborhood with which I am quite familiar. A young and active lady, a Christian and a Church member, was employed to teach their district school. She found a most conservative group of farmers, faction torn. They had already closed the neighborhood church as a result of petty strife. They had but little local pride left and no community organization. No family in the school district regularly attended the services of any church. She formed a local, country school district P. T. A. Through its activities she met a young farmer in the district, married him, and they made their home within sight of the school house. Soon they assisted in organizing a township Farm Bureau, held several Farm Bureau activities in the abandoned church property, succeeded in re-establishing some definite neighborhood ties and in 1936 it was reported that every family in their school district, and the majority in their township, are attending the church services of a country town six miles from the place where the erstwhile school teacher maintains a cosy home for their family of three.

We have space for yet another illustration. Into an Iowa village of less than a thousand souls came a young returned soldier who had just completed his professional preparation, resumed upon his return from overseas. The town had four churches. The young man had a good voice and began to sing in one of the village choirs. Soon he was found teaching a Sunday school class. Not too religious, fond of sports and fishing and hunting and any kind of outdoor activity, always owning a hunting dog or two, the young man one day realized that for five years he had been in charge of the juvenile mischief-makers of the community as the village scout master. He noticed that the older youth of his own and adjoining communities were in need of guidance. After talking the matter over with his pastor, a local young folks organization was revived with him as president. The work of this group under his leadership prospered greatly and a situation over which many had worried cleared itself up over an area that included two counties and parts of several others. He pioneered in and developed a method of handling a certain phase of social work which is now in general use. He and his good wife would be surprised beyond expression if advised that his work was described and his splendid service recognized in this publication.

These illustrations are of ordinary people who did ordinary deeds in ordinary situations--meeting the needs of their communities by working with the organizations at hand, doing the next thing patiently and faithfully. To them, and to the thousands of others similarly placed, Iowa owes a debt beyond all our powers of measurement. Because these fine rural folk gave themselves to community and church and God in serving other rural folk, our rural life is richer, our rural churches are stronger and we dare look forward with confidence and hope to a day

'When knowledge, hand in hand with peace
Shall walk the earth abroad -
The day of perfect righteousness,
The promised day of God.'